

Institutionen för pedagogik, kommunikation och lärande

Doing Project Work

The Interactional Organization of Tasks, Resources, and Instructions

av

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

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Abstract

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In the Swedish educational system, there is a strong emphasis on student autonomy, active knowledge seeking, and critical reflection. Students regularly work individually or in groups with projects that are organized around problems that do not have a straightforward solution. This thesis investigates how such projects are interactionally and practically accomplished. Through detailed analyses of video recorded material of classroom interaction, and within an approach informed by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, the thesis examines the interactional organization of tasks, resources, and instructions in project work.

In the investigated setting, the students are asked to address whether the greenhouse effect is a natural phenomenon or caused by humans, how the environmental policies of different countries change the local and global ecosystems, whether they as individuals can help prevent future environmental damage, etc. A central idea of the project work is that the students should produce texts 'on their own' based on information they have found in sources they have selected. Although the students are supposed to work independently with these issues, they clearly rely on the instructional and organizational work of teachers. Teachers set the agenda, plan assignments, formulate instructions, give introductions, and provide guidance. Teachers also evaluate the quality of what the students produce, which means that the students continuously need to address normative issues about what they have done and what they are about to do. Given that students often lack the resources for assessing a chosen course of action, this also means students routinely encounter issues that they themselves find difficult to handle.

The three empirical studies of the thesis investigate how instructions are given and received, how students and teachers are dealing with the inherent and designed openness of the tasks, and how the encounters between teachers and students are materially, bodily, and interactionally organized. Study 1 shows how the students interpret a task and how they position themselves in relation to the expectations of this task. Study 2 examines student-initiated instructional interaction and shows some systematic ways in which the actions of students and teachers are contingent on, shaped by, and oriented to these tasks and the associated texts. Study 3 addresses how talk and bodily conduct are coordinated and sequentially organized in the closing of encounters and how teachers and students negotiate the transition from instruction to the closing phase.